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# THE FUTURE OF FICTION.

BY EDGAR SALTUS.

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IT SEEMS but yesterday that the novelist succeeded the troubadour. It was the duty of the latter to amuse, to beguile an idle hour, to compliment and to please. But with the passing of the fantasist it has been discovered that the art of pleasing is the secret of mediocrity, that the scalpel is more useful than the lute. And as the old order changes, song and story change as well. Their mission is no longer to please; it is to cure.

To Madame de Châteauroux—and to any one else, perhaps, who happened that way—the fifteenth Louis of France was accustomed to assert that an attempt to overdress human nature was nothing less than high treason. This quip has since fossilized into an axiom. If in other countries, our own for instance, it has not taken root, may it not be that the soil is at fault? They have truffles in Périgord; there are none in Westchester. But there is a better explanation: we are succeeding in an attempt to complete a civilization which shall be distinctively our own. This effort, which, despite details that jar, is grandly manifest in the political, commercial, and social aspects of the hour, is yet in certain departments of literature, in fiction principally, still stumbling in unlighted paths. Now, fiction is in no sense the trivial thing which it is popularly considered. It is an educational factor of peculiar importance, one whose influence may be salutary or the reverse; moreover, it is the complement of a nation's annals, that insight into daily life which the ancient monarchies neglected to prepare for us, and through which neglect the volumes that treat of past grandeurs and decadence are handsomely bound and never read. In view, then, of the progressive tendencies of the hour, it is curious to probe the defection in this unique respect.

In this connection it will seem trite to say that no one begins to fresco a wall before the house is roofed ; homespun must precede satin ; utility, grace : as a nation we have been so fully occupied in attending to foundations that the need of festoons and astrogals has kept very few people awake. Those whom it has tormented have, generally speaking, been travellers from other shores. They have declared that we are lacking in traditions and ignorant of art. With the traditions we can dispense, at least for the present. Time, in which all things unroll, will fill that gap unprompted. But with art it is different. From whatever stand-point it may be considered, art, in its essence, is a theory ; a corner of the universe, some one has said, interpreted by a temperament. With its trans-Atlantic achievements every one is more or less familiar. Impresarii bring with them applauded scores ; the masterpieces of foreign painters we have usually a chance to examine. Yet in either case the theories that presided at their parturitions remain remote. The accusation, then, of the casual traveller is not without foundation. We are ignorant of art precisely as we are ignorant of truffles. We appreciate, we consume, but we do not produce. This defect, like that of the absence of traditions, Time, it is not utopian to suppose, will one day efface ; we will have theories of our own and astonish the world with our conceptions. Yet that which in regard to music and the brush lends excuse to our present lack of enterprise is the fact, already noted, that Europe sends its masterpieces by express. Barring the question of national glory, we have no absolute need of composers and painters of native birth ; we can enjoy Wagner without understanding a word of German, and a picture signed Millet may be admired without the interpreter's aid.

In regard to literature, however, and particularly in regard to fiction, it is permissible to strum a different guitar. We have the liberty no doubt, if we wish it, to digest English novels, but as a matter of fact we don't. Save in exceptions rare, yet happily existing, we leave them to the housemaid and the spider. The British author of to-day, as is the case with his German and his Italian brother, exists on the very thing we lack—traditions. He can, and does, with pardonable pride refer you to writers Who Came Before. When our country becomes as old as his, we can, and doubtless will, be able to do very much the same thing ; but

meanwhile we cannot delight ourselves with the other existing schools of fiction, the French and the Russian, for there is the Tower of Babel looming its inhibition at the very wish. The scores and paintings which Europeans produce may continue yet awhile to pleasure both ear and eye, but as for fiction translated, it is like a pressed flower—the charm, the aroma and life, have gone.

It may not, then, be impertinent to the purpose of this paper to assert that such fiction as we happen to have, while admirable in many respects, is native only in that the coloring has more or less of a local tint. Eliminate that tint, give it another, and the characteristics differ not at all from those to which the English novelist has accustomed us; they perfectly express a relative impression of What Should Be and What Should Not; they rarely express What Is. In the home manufacture the action may be a trifle more rapid; in the last chapter there may be fewer births and obituaries and a finer regard for the reader's privilege to take this and that for granted; but in the main the model is the same, and it is of this model that the public is getting weary. What it wants is something else. Less of the magic lantern, perhaps, and more of life; not that particular phase which ought to be and is not, but life in its pettiness and occasional splendor, and displayed, too, with so little ink that at the last page the reader may murmur, "I would recognize those people on sight." In view, however, of certain conditions of thought, an attempt of this kind is less easy than might be supposed.

To give a novel that interest which shall differentiate it from a disquisition, a plot is necessary. In that plot there may be a murder, a forgery, some misadventure, the loot of an illusion—all of these elements, if need be, and more of the same kind; but there must be love, and therein lies the difficulty. The murder may be committed in circumstances of such atrocity that the reader will scream with fright; the forms of villany exposed in the forgery or in the misadventure may rival anything in the Newgate Calendar; but love, in this country at least, must be treated from the Puritan stand-point. There would, of course, be no difficulty in so treating it were the Puritan stand-point the only one from which it could be viewed. Unfortunately for human nature, there happens to be many another one than that. In a novel, then, which aims to portray life not as we want it to be,

but as it is, why should the various phases of the lever of existence be omitted? Why, indeed? It cannot be because of the Young Person, for ignorance has never preserved a virtue yet. Nor is it because of any conviction that woman is always either vestal or monandrous, for we are aware that that is not the case. It may, then, be due to some conventional idea concerning the limits in which ornamental literature should move. In that event we may wonder whence it came. Certainly not from the British classics, nor yet from those which we regard as our own. Perhaps, then, it is a secretion of the mind, a category of the intellect which, like the concepts of time and of space, has no existence outside of our own imagination.

To choose one argument from an hundred, consider Shakspeare's suavest romance, "*Romeo and Juliet*." It is true that plot and characters are a transference from a story which Luigi da Porto fabricated out of a Veronese legend, and it is equally true that, the other day, somebody announced that Shakspeare never wrote a line in his life. But let it be admitted that the tragedy in question is the work of another man with the same name; the beauty of the lines exist, the interest in hero and heroine remain unchanged, the drama is as palpitating as before, and yet the central situation, the one which lends it its charm and allurements, is not seduction, for in that case *Juliet* would be a victim to the wiles of *Romeo*, and the moralist might have his little say. But it is not that; it is a portrayal of that emotion which stirs the pulse of every youth, however noble, and every maiden, however pure, and one, parenthetically, without which the world would cease to be. And now, by way of example, let it be supposed that the legend of *Romeo* and *Juliet* is adapted and localized; that, instead of being the children of inimical robber barons, they are the children of rival jobbers in stocks; divest them of the magnificence of myth; put them here in New York; make them talk prose instead of melody, but preserve the central situation, and from where you sit you can hear the appeals to Comstock. To this it may be objected that the ability which Shakspeare, or his namesake, possessed is overlooked, and on that hypothetical objection the point of this paper may safely turn;—there is no criterion by which a story can be judged as moral or the reverse; there are but two classes of fiction—stories which are well written and stories which are not.

The latter classification no one is ever forced to consider, but in the former are to be found the elements of that future branch of literature which may not be fiction, perhaps, or, at least, not fiction as we now use that term, but rather a sentiable psychology for the use of the idle, one that is dictated by the heart, one that whispers to the reader and disturbs him, and leads him unconsciously into that temple which Marcus Aurelius erected to compassion, to human kindness and abnegation of self.

To surprise the reader in this fashion is well-nigh impossible with the methods now in vogue. The ambitious writer has on one side of him a corpse still warm, in whose features he recognizes Romanticism; on the other is that silk stocking filled with mud which is the emblem of the Naturalists. But somewhere near at hand are tombs marked Dostoïevsky, Flaubert, Eliot—names that tell all yet nothing save disinterestedness, charity, and forgiveness of sin. Should he hesitate, he is lost, for romanticism has guiles and philters, the revery in the moonlight, the kiss of women, the shock of swords, all the luridness of melodrama enveloped in sonorous periods, round and empty. And naturalism, too, has its promises, the indignation of the critic, and coffers that overflow. Between allurements like these many have halted and will halt and conjecture, but presently, to-morrow perhaps, some hero of letters will brush them both aside and pass, with lip austere, straight to the tombs and kneel there and commune. When he rises, it will be with that novel which you and I await.

Concerning the possible elements of that work suppositions are not wholly idle. In any event it is permissible to fancy that the author will be too wise not to be occasionally stupid. He will leave conventionality in the skirts of the surplice; Goethe demanded more light—he will need more air, not the atmosphere of a seraglio, but some broad plateau where the lungs are invigorated by that mother of realism, nature herself. He will study the crowd and its emanations, the unit as well, and then, from his knowledge of nature and his knowledge of man, he will be able to explain the multiplicity of the ego, the variable influence of surroundings, the change of views that ensue. Behind the visible act will be the analysis of the invisible cause, the coördination of contradictories, the inevitable deduced from chance. And this so clearly, yet so objectively, that the reader who picks up the book as he might enter a fancy ball, suddenly, through the

mere force of accumulated trifles and unobserved effects, will find himself among men and women who no longer seem, but are, who appeal to him, for whom he suffers, and for whose miseries he would devise a cure.

It is this that the coming novelist will do. In the perspective he may leave the nothingness of creeds, but in the foreground will be the majesty of that Unknown which our intellect has been impotent to grasp. He will do this, more perhaps, for always in his ears will be the mutterings of the Sphinx propounding the eternal riddle. And by way of reward, a year or two after his death one publisher will confide to another that Soandso is beginning to sell.

EDGAR SALTUS.